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ABSTRACT

Parents as School Partners is a volunteer research initiative of the National Council of Jewish Women and its research institute, called the Center for the Child. This initiative focuses on parent involvement to promote children's school success. This document contains a project overview and six accompanying reports providing a detailed presentation of the project's activities: (1) surveys of 193 school district superintendents regarding the existence of parent involvement policies and the types of programs being enacted to implement these policies; (2) 33 focus groups with parents, teachers, and principals about what parent involvement means to them and what they need to make it work; (3) a compilation of replicable school-based programs for enhancing parent involvement; (4) a literature review of over 200 articles on the impact of parent involvement on children's school success. The findings provided a broad description of current issues in the field of parent involvement and revealed that although there was widespread consensus among parents and educators that parent involvement is critical to children's school success, parents and schools do not share a vision of how to educate children. Both parents and teachers identified a need for open dialogue between homes and schools, especially for interactions that are positive and not problem-focused. Professional and inservice training for teachers on working with families is not widely available. The findings reported that most model parent involvement programs require parents to conform to school practice rather than training educators to accommodate to the culture of parents, or to incorporate parents' views. The six accompanying reports include, "Program Compilation: Replicable Programs to Enhance Parent Involvement"; "Literature Review: A Critical Review of the Research Evidence"; "Parent Focus Groups: Voices from the Field"; "Teacher Focus Groups: Voices from the Field"; "School Principal Focus Groups: Voices from the Field"; and "School District Superintendents Survey: Parent Involvement Policies, Programs, & Practices." (Author/KB)

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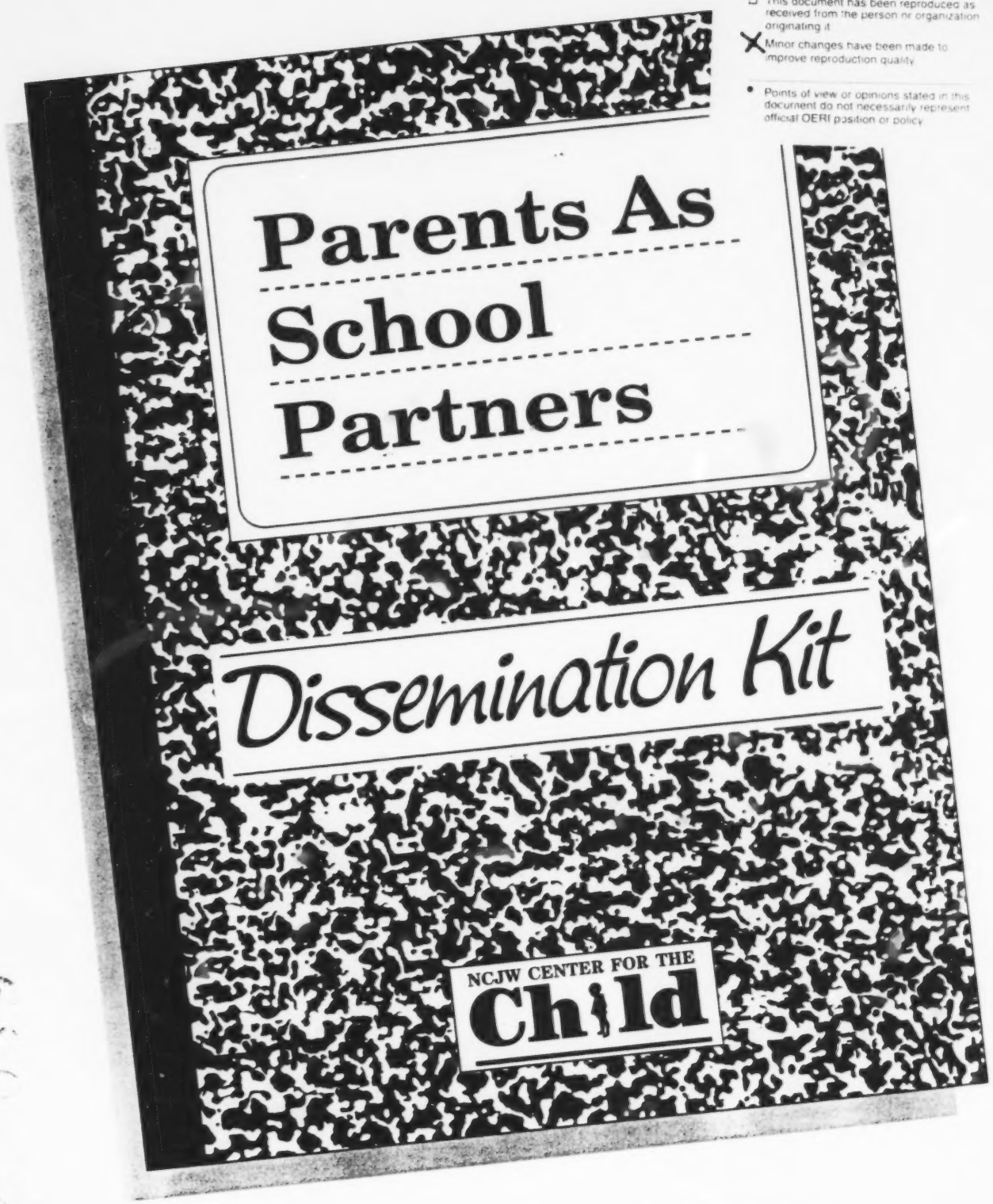

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Parents As School Partners

Project Overview

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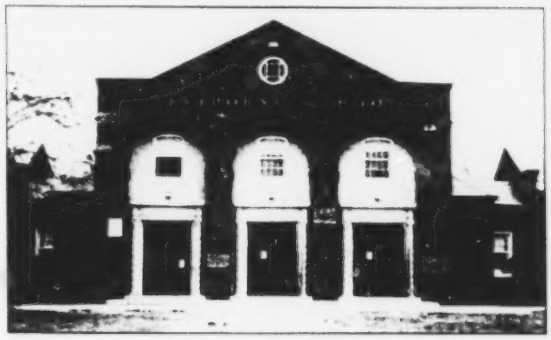
Project Overview

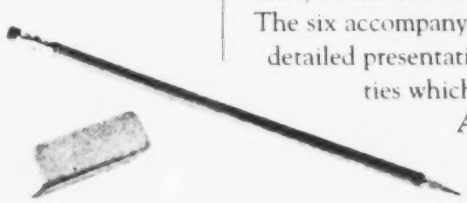


Parents As School Partners is a volunteer research initiative of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) and its applied research institute, the Center for the Child. This action/research project focuses on parent involvement to promote their children's school success, a topic that has received significant national attention. ***Parents As School Partners*** is unique in its simultaneous consideration of policies, programs, practice, and research to determine the status of current knowledge in the field of parent involvement.

As the start of its long term commitment to this issue, in the spring of 1995 NCJW launched ***Parents As School Partners*** with funding from the Danforth Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Kalman and Ida Wolens Foundation, and General Mills Foundation. Four preliminary activities were conducted to make a significant contribution to the field of parent involvement. These activities involved both researchers at the Center for the Child and volunteers in 52 NCJW Sections around the country:

- Surveys of 193 school district superintendents regarding the existence of parent involvement policies and the types of programs being enacted to implement these policies.
- Thirty-three focus groups with parents, teachers, and principals to hear from the "voices in the field" what parent involvement means to them and what they need to make it work.
- A compilation of replicable school-based programs for enhancing parent involvement.
- A critical and scholarly literature review of over 200 articles on the impact of parent involvement on children's school success.

The knowledge gained from these activities provides an in-depth investigation of what we do and do not know about parent involvement, what policies and programs are being enacted, and what they are likely to mean in the lives of those most affected. The six accompanying reports provide a more detailed presentation of each of the project activities which together make up the ***Parents As School Partners*** project.



The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) is a 90,000 member volunteer organization with a one–hundred year history of community service, advocacy, research, and education. NCJW's Center for the Child was founded in 1983 to conduct research to improve programs and policies for children and their families.

Working together, NCJW Sections and the Center for the Child can make a difference in the lives of women, children, and families.

For more information, please contact Dr. Amy Baker, Director, NCJW Center for the Child, 53 W. 23rd Street, New York, NY 10010 Ph: (212) 645-4048 Fax: (212) 645-7466

Parent Involvement: Challenges and Opportunities

*The data collected from the four **Parents As School Partners** activities provides a broad mapping of current issues in the field of parent involvement. Ten major themes emerged which deserve special attention as they point to directions in future programs and practice.*

- There is widespread consensus among parents, educators, practitioners, policy makers, and researchers that parent involvement is critical to children's school success.
- While parents and schools share a common mission of educating children, they do not share a vision of how to accomplish this goal. There are inherent tensions in the roles and responsibilities of parents and teachers.
- Parent involvement theory and exemplary parent involvement programs recognize the value of creating meaningful partnerships among homes and schools in order to enhance parent involvement. These partnerships recognize and value the unique contribution of homes and schools to the education of children.

- There is a need for more open dialogue between homes and schools, especially interactions that are positive and not problem-focused. Parents and teachers want more opportunities to talk about how parent involvement feels to them and how it can be enhanced.
- Professional and in-service training for teachers on working with families is not yet widely available.
- Parent involvement requires effort on the parts of teachers and parents who do not have regularly scheduled time in their daily routines for parent involvement.
- There are many institutional and personal barriers to effective home-school partnerships.
- There are few opportunities for personal and individualized contact between parents and teachers.
- Most model parent involvement programs require parents to conform to school practice rather than training educators to accommodate to the cultures of or incorporate the views of parents.

- Less is known about the effectiveness of specific types of parent involvement for enhancing children's school achievement than commonly has been assumed.

Thanks to the following NCJW Sections who participated in the Parents As School Partners Project

Akron (OH)
Baltimore (MD)
Chicago (IL)
Cleveland (OH)
Concordia (NJ)
Contra Costa (CA)
Gr. Dallas (TX)
Gr. Danbury (CT)
Gr. Detroit (MI)
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West Virginia (WV)
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Worcester (MA)

Special thanks to the NCJW Gr. Miami Section (FL) for helping underwrite these materials.

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Parents As School Partners

Program Compilation:

Replicable Programs to Enhance Parent Involvement

NCJW CENTER FOR THE Child

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The Issue

There is widespread consensus that parent involvement is a key component for the school success of America's children. Based on this belief, policies are being enacted to promote and increase parent involvement at all levels of schooling. Therefore, schools will be seeking innovative programs to foster school-home partnerships.

To address this need, the NCJW Center for the Child identified and researched promising parent involvement programs for school districts around the country. The program compilation was one of four activities of ***Parents As School Partners,*** NCJW's volunteer research and action project exploring parent involvement to promote children's school success.

Procedures

Programs were considered for inclusion in the compilation if they could be implemented by schools, were for school-aged children, and aimed to increase parent involvement. Information about each program was gathered to determine if it could be considered "promising" for implementation by schools based on its current use and a well-documented set of program materials. It is important to note that having demonstrated effectiveness through rigorous program evaluation was not considered a criteria of promising programs. While this would be ideal, too few of the programs were rigorously evaluated to meet that criteria.

The Findings

Five types of school-based programs for improving parent involvement were identified:

- **CURRICULUM MODELS:** Programs with a fully developed curriculum in which parents and children work together to improve the child's skills and abilities. These programs deliver materials to parents through workshops or home visits, or by sending them home with children.
- **PARENT WORKSHOPS:** Programs which consist of workshops to provide parents with skills and information to increase involvement in their children's education.
- **MULTI-COMPONENT PROGRAMS:** Programs which have many components, including parent workshops, home-based materials, and a parental decision-making component.
- **HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS:** Programs which are not curriculum-based, but which aim to improve the school climate with a strong emphasis on parental involvement in every aspect of the program.
- **OTHER PROGRAMS:** Programs which did not fit into any other categories. These programs aim to train teachers, enhance parent volunteerism, increase school-home communication and bring books into the home.

The chart on the following pages provides basic information about these promising programs.

Highlights

- There are few parent involvement programs for parents of children older than elementary school-aged.
- Few parent involvement programs have been rigorously evaluated.
- Most parent involvement programs aim to change parents' behavior.
- There are few parent involvement programs for training teachers or changing the way that schools and parent interact.

Curriculum Models

PROGRAM	YEAR	GRADE	DURATION	PARENT INVOLVEMENT	PROGRAM CONTACT
Bowdoin Method I/II	1975	5-12 Yrs	17 books	Parents learn a variety of parent involvement lessons, cognitive skills, how children learn, and emotional and social needs of children.	Virginia Schmidt Webster International Inc. (800) PARNTED (800) 727-6833
Calendar of Skills	1992	K-6th	Ongoing	Parents receive calendars from school with daily learning activity suggestions.	Duvall County Board of Education, Michael Walker (904) 771-2417
Families and Schools Together (FAST)	1988	Prek-3rd	8 2 1/2-hour sessions with monthly follow-up sessions	Parent-child, parent-school, parent-parent, parent-team, and parent-community interactions.	Family Service America Linda Wheeler, Director (414) 359-1040 (414) 359-1074 (fax)
Family Math	1981	K-9th	3-6 2-hour sessions	Parents learn how to work with child on math activities.	Virginia Thompson, Director (510) 642-1823
MegaSkills	1988	Elem. & Mid.	Ongoing	Parent learn in workshops how to use "recipes" of home learning activities with child. Focus on life skills for academic achievement and emotional growth.	Dorothy Rich, Home School Institute (202) 466-3633
Parents and Computers Teaching Students (PACTS)	1982	Elem. & Mid	2 3-hour sessions	Parents are trained to use educational software to use at home with child.	Adrienne Adams, Instructional Technology Detroit Public Schools (313) 596-3534
Parents as Educational Partners (PEP)	1986	1st-3rd	Ongoing	Parents are trained to interact positively with their children and to work with their children at home.	Pam Lott, Grandview Consolidated School District (816) 761-7246
Parents on Board		4-14 Yrs	1 3-hour	Parents learn in workshop workshop how to help children succeed in school.	Karen Sullivan, Active Parenting Press (800) 825-0060
Push for Excellence		7th	10 weeks	Parents study with child one hour per weeknight.	June Brown, PUSH-EXCEL (312) 373-3366
Teachers Involves Parent in Schoolwork	1988; 1995 (rev)	K-8th	Ongoing	Children interact with parents or other family members to share ideas and to complete homework.	Karen Clark Salinas, John Hopkins University (410) 516-8818

Parent Workshops

PROGRAM	YEAR	GRADE	DURATION	PARENT INVOLVEMENT	PROGRAM CONTACT
Epic Home Program	1980	Birth-12th	6 2-hour sessions	Parent workshops include specific workshops on promoting parent/school interactions.	Vito J. Borrello, President (716) 886-6396
Parent Involvement Resource Manual	1995	K-7th	11 Workshops	Parents learn a variety of parent involvement lessons and Title I federal guidelines.	Judith Dato, Webster International Inc. (800) PARNTED (800) 727-6833
Parents Assuring Student Success (PASS)	1993		7 2.5-hour workshops	Parents learn how to help child learn.	Susan Dunkar, National Educational Service, (800) 733-6786
The Parent Project	1994	Elem.	6 2-hour workshops	Parents learn in workshops how to help their child learn.	Dr. James Vopat, Carroll College Waukesha, WI 53186 (414) 547-1211
Parents Sharing Books	1989	Prek-Mid.	6 workshops	Parents learn how to read and share books with their children.	Ellie McFarlane, Family Literacy Center (800) 759-4723
The Right Question Project	1990	K-12th	2 3-hour workshops	Parents learn how to support, monitor and advocate by learning how to ask the right questions. Parents can also be trained to be facilitators.	Ana Rodriguez, The Right Question Project (617) 628-4070
Studying at Home/Reading at Home	1985	Elem.	3 1.5-hour sessions	Parents learn how to help child study and read.	Sam Redding, ExecutiveDirector, Academic Development Institute (800) 759-1495

Multi-Component Programs

PROGRAM	YEAR	GRADE	DURATION	PARENT INVOLVEMENT	PROGRAM CONTACT
AHEAD	1987	1st-5th	Ongoing	Parents receive curriculum in home visits and attend group meetings with MegaSkills curriculum.	Genethia Hayes, Director (213) 295-8582
Baltimore's School & Family Connections Project	1987	Elem. & Mid.	Ongoing	Each school developed own project.	Susan Herrick/ Karen Salinas (410) 516-8800

(continued from page 4)

Multi-Component Programs

PROGRAM	YEAR	GRADE	DURATION	PARENT INVOLVEMENT	PROGRAM CONTACT
LIFE	1989	K-2nd	Ongoing	Parent education, Family Math, PASS, Prek-screening, summer enrichment, teacher training.	Dr. Ejlali, LIFE Project (423) 753-1100
National Network of Partnership-2000 schools.	1996	Elem. Mid.& HS	Ongoing	Schools are assisted to develop their own comprehensive program partnership using action teams for school, family, and community partnerships.	Joyce Epstein or Karen Clark Salinas Johns Hopkins University (410) 516-8800

Home-School Partnerships

PROGRAM	YEAR	GRADE	DURATION	PARENT INVOLVEMENT	PROGRAM CONTACT
Parent-Teacher Action Project	1990	K-8th	Ongoing	Eight projects developed locally.	Center on Children, Families, Communities, Schools, and Children, John Hopkins University (410) 516-0370
School Development Program	1968	K-12th	Ongoing	Parents participate in governance of school, are actively involved in daily activities, and learn through workshops how to help child learn.	Cynthia Savo, Yale Child Study Center, New Haven (203) 737-1012

Other Programs

PROGRAM	YEAR	GRADE	DURATION	PARENT INVOLVEMENT	PROGRAM CONTACT
Epic School Program	1980	Prek-12th	1 4-hour session	Teachers identify barriers to parent involvement and ways to overcome them and receive packets for parents to work on with their children.	Vito J. Borrello, President (716) 886-6396.
Parents Assisting with School Success (PASS)	1989	K-12th	Ongoing	Parents volunteer in the classroom and receive support and supervision.	Washington County Public Schools, (615) 753-2131.
Reading Is Fundamental	1966	Prek-12th	3 book events per school year	Parents plan and implement reading motivation activities, order books, and read with their children at home and school.	James Wendorf, Director Reading Is Fundamental,Inc. (202) 287-3220.
TransParent	1987	K-8th	Ongoing	Parents have access to school information through special phone lines.	Betty Phillips Center for Parenthood Education, (615) 322-8080

Other Reports

Parents As School Partners
Project Overview
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Teacher Focus Groups: Voices From the Field
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School Principal Focus Groups: Voices From the Field
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School District Superintendents Survey: Parent Involvement Policies, Programs & Practices
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Literature Review: A Critical Review of the Research Evidence
Child

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Parents As School Partners

Literature Review:

A Critical Review of the Research Evidence

NCJW CENTER FOR THE Child

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The Issue

There is widespread consensus that parent involvement is key to children's school success. The strength of this belief is evidenced by the national, state, and local policies being enacted to increase parent involvement. Such policies are based on the widely held belief in the benefits of parents involvement for students. However, this belief is based on evidence considered definitive, but which, due to four limitations in research methods, is not yet entirely conclusive.

Background

Research in the field has produced promising scientific evidence for the benefits of parent involvement for student achievement, but this evidence is not entirely convincing or definitive. In particular, four limitations in research methods have compromised the quality of much parent involvement research to date: non-experimental procedures; failure to isolate parent involvement's specific effects; inconsistent definitions of parent involvement; and lack of objective measures. Thus, knowledge generated from this research is based on assumption and generalization as much as rigorous scientific findings.

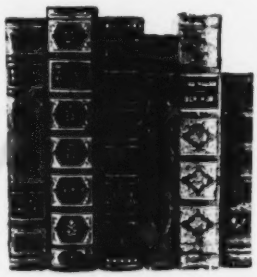
Educators have also assumed that all types of parent involvement are equally important based on limited data about specific types of parent involvement. Thus, different kinds of involvement are currently given equal weight in theory and practice, leading to overconfidence in what programs can actually accomplish. Clearly, effective parent involvement programs and practice must be informed by sound research knowledge.

With increased national attention to parent involvement (such as the Family Involvement Partnership for Learning of the U.S. Department of Education) and its benefits, an examination of the quality of research evidence is needed and timely. Available research must be carefully analyzed to determine the scientific evidence of parent involvement's effectiveness. In particular, it is important to determine the effects of specific kinds of involvement for distinct outcomes for various student groups. This knowledge is essential for the development of innovative programs and practices.

The Literature Review

To address these issues and evaluate current knowledge about the relationship between parent involvement and children's school achievement, the NCJW Center for the Child conducted this ***Parents As School Partners*** literature review. The review was conducted to clarify what is and is not known about parent involvement, to determine what types of involvement work, and to identify gaps in knowledge that can be addressed in future research.

The literature review was one of four activities of ***Parents As School Partners***, NCJW's volunteer research and action initiative exploring parent involvement to promote their children's school success.



Procedures

Over 200 articles were included in the literature review. Only articles relating specifically to the benefits of parent involvement in the education of school-age children from kindergarten through 12th grade were included. Existing reviews and several computer-based searches and scans of key education and child development journals were used to identify appropriate articles for inclusion. Each article was evaluated for quality and strength of the research.

Articles ranged from opinion papers and program descriptions to theoretical papers, reviews, and experimental studies. Experimental studies about parent involvement's impact on student achievement were examined and analyzed for the following methodological limitations: (1) use of non-experimental procedures; (2) the extent to which the effects of parent involvement were not isolated from other treatment effects; (3) inconsistency in how parent involvement was defined; and (4) use of non-objective measures of parent involvement.

A total of 211 papers were included in this review: 23 opinion papers/program descriptions; 12 theoretical papers; 31 other reviews, 14 descriptive studies; and 131 empirical studies. These 211 papers represent a comprehensive — yet not entirely exhaustive — survey of the research literature on parent involvement.

Findings

Findings relating to the various types of articles included in the review are presented below.

■ **Theoretical Articles:** While there are many different ways to conceptualize the home-school relationship, there is growing consensus that the community impact model best reflects this complex relationship. The community impact model asserts that families, schools, and communities make important contributions to and share responsibility for children's achievement in mutually reinforcing ways. While theoretically strong, this model has yet to be tested in empirical studies.

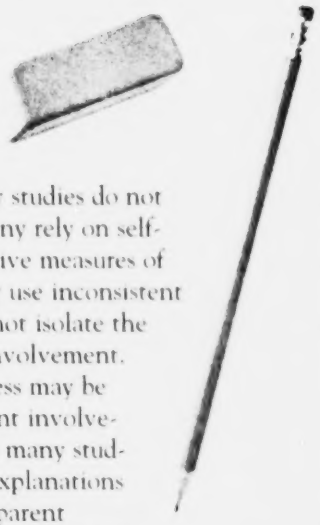
Dr. Joyce Epstein's[1] system classifying six types of parent involvement is widely cited. However, its potential contribution to theory and practice has not been fully explored. Measure development, hypothesis testing, and program evaluation are all activities to which this classification system could be—but have not yet been—applied.

■ **Program Descriptions:** Programs to enhance parent involvement are being developed based on the community impact model. Two features of this model are particularly promising. The first emphasizes partnership, in which parents, principals, and teachers work together to enhance parent involvement in their schools. Secondly, flexible design of parent involvement projects allows participants to customize programs to suit local needs.

■ **Opinion Papers:** Most opinion papers promote the benefits of parent involvement. These papers are generally informal and do not present data or indicate how proposals are supported by previous work and knowledge.

■ **Research Reviews:** Many researchers in the field assume published research is of adequate quality, and so reviewers tend to draw conclusions based on these findings. Most existing reviews do not critically assess the quality of included studies.

■ **Empirical Research:** All four limitations in research methods (cited above) are in many of the existing experimental studies on parent involvement. Many studies do not have adequate designs; many rely on self-report or other non-objective measures of parent involvement; many use inconsistent definitions; and many do not isolate the specific effects of parent involvement. Given these limitations, less may be actually *known* about parent involvement than is *presumed*. As many studies do not rule out other explanations for relationships between parent involvement and student achievement, caution must be used in making generalizations and inferences based on these studies.



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[1] Epstein, J. (1995) Schools/Family/Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share. Phi Delta Kappan, pp. 701-712.

Recommendations For Future Research

There are several recommendations for future investigations which might address existing gaps in knowledge about how parent involvement affects student achievement. In particular, future research might try to:

- Use experimental procedures —notably random assignment — when appropriate in a field setting.
- Specifically measure a parent's involvement (i.e., type and level) independent of other elements of a particular program.
- Distinguish the effects of the program's content from the deliverer (parent or other adult) of the program.
- Clarify which aspect of parent involvement is being measured.
- Use objective measures of parent involvement, such as direct observation of parent behavior and standardized data collection tools.
- Use measures of parent involvement which reflect the influence of more than one parent on children's achievement.
- Design studies to examine relationships between parent involvement and student achievement within gender.
- Take into account the complex and transactional nature of interrelationships between parent involvement and its outcomes.

Other Reports

For more information, please contact Dr. Amy Baker, Director, NCJW Center for the Child,
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Parents As School Partners

Parent Focus Groups:

Voices From the Field

NCJW CENTER FOR THE Child

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Thanks to the following NCJW Sections who conducted focus groups:

Baltimore (MD)	Milwaukee (WI)
Cleveland (OH)	Pittsburgh (PA)
Dallas (TX)	St. Louis (MO)
Gr. Danbury (CT)	Stamford (CT)
Long Beach (CA)	University (FL)
Gr. Miami (FL)	West Virginia (WV)

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The Issue

There is widespread consensus that parent involvement is a key component for the school success of America's children. Based on this belief, policies are currently being enacted to promote and increase parent involvement at all levels of schooling. Therefore, partnerships will be forged between homes, schools, and communities with an unparalled level of contact between parents and educators. It is surprising that parents have had few opportunities to share their unique and valuable perspectives about what parent involvement means to them and what they need to make these partnerships work.

To address this issue, NCJW Sections around the country conducted focus groups with parents to hear from the "voices from the field" about parent involvement. Focus groups were also conducted with teachers and principals. The focus groups were one of four activities of ***Parents As School Partners,*** NCJW's volunteer research and action initiative exploring parent involvement to promote children's school success.

"That's parent involvement to me... the day-to-day decisions that are going to affect your children."

The Sections

Twelve NCJW Sections conducted parent focus groups. These Sections were diverse in size and geography. NCJW volunteers received training through individual consultation, site visits, an in-depth *How-to Guide*, a *Partners in Progress* newsletter, and ongoing intensive individualized technical assistance.

"They say they want parent involvement but a lot of times it's sort of on their terms."

The Focus Groups

Sixteen focus groups were conducted. Parent participants were invited through random selection procedures. Each focus group was audiotaped and followed a similar format, which included: an introduction; signing of consent forms; opening, main, and summary questions; payment of subjects; and completion of participant background information forms. Questions addressed types of contact parents have with schools, the conditions under which certain types of contact occur, their beliefs about parent involvement, and their perception of the school's interest in and attitudes toward their involvement.

The Parent Participants

Twelve focus groups were held with parents of elementary school children; three with parents of middle school children; and one with parents of high school children. In total, there were 111 parent participants. 53 (47.7%) were Caucasian, 46 (41.4%) were African-American, and 12 (10.8%) were from another minority, mostly Hispanic. Half of the parents had no more than a high school education and nearly half were not employed outside the home. 39 (35%) were single parents and one-fifth (21.8%) claimed government assistance as their family's primary source of income.

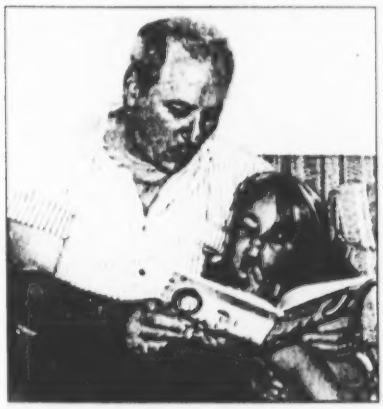
• Highlights •

- Many parents don't know how to initiate involvement in the schools.
- Not all parents feel welcome to join the PTA.
- Parents are more likely to attend school events in which their child is performing.
- Services and programs offered to parents by the school may open the door to other types of involvement.
- Few parents have opportunities to be decision-makers within schools.
- Many parents do not believe that the school welcomes their input and feedback about curriculum, teacher evaluations, and school policy.
- There are few avenues for parents to provide schools with their ideas about their child or about the school in general.
- Most school-home communication is one-way: from schools to homes.
- Most parents desire personal and individualized contact with their child's teacher and want more individualized school-home communication about their child's progress and needs.
- Many parents are uncertain about how much to oversee and help with their child's homework and want more guidance in this area so that they can best help their child learn.
- Parents would like to be informed about their child's curriculum and ways that they can support and enhance their child's learning at home.
- Parents want timely notification about their child's behavioral or academic problems.

What Parents Had To Say

Parents' discussions from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim from the audio tapes. The over 300 pages of transcripts were read and analyzed for content, resulting in six general categories of issues discussed by the parents:

- Types of Involvement
- Barriers to Involvement
- Reasons for Involvement
- School-Home Communication
- Facilitators of Involvement
- How Schools Could be Different



The following pages present parents' perspectives on these six themes and include quotes highlighting key issues raised. The ***Parents As School Partners*** *project also included focus groups with teachers and principals. Please refer to these reports for a fuller understanding of the issues raised.*

Types Of Involvement

Parents varied in the type and level of their involvement in the schools.

■ **Volunteering at School:** Being physically present at the school — as a class volunteer or office aid — was a common type of involvement. Interestingly, parents varied in the extent to which they wished to be in their own child's class. Parents who volunteered did so because they believed it was beneficial for the school and their children. • *I volunteer when I can. And I've been in the class to read them stories and anything else that they will allow me to do with a three-year-old behind me.*

■ **Participating in the PTA/PTO:** Fixing up libraries, running food drives, planning and funding field trips, helping schools obtain computers, planning teacher appreciation activities, funding prevention programs, and organizing talent shows were just some PTA activities in which parents participated. However, not all parents were able to participate or felt comfortable participating in the PTA.

■ **Parent-Teacher Communications:** Some parents maintained ongoing contact with teachers, others addressed particular problems, and some did not even attend regularly scheduled meetings. • *I keep in contact with the teachers. I will call them or they will call me because I'm a very active mother and we need to communicate. I think my first [job] is to make sure that all teachers know I want them to communicate with me.* Not all parents had such communication with the schools. One parent, when asked if she attended any parent meetings, said: *"...They have 'em but I don't go."*

■ **Attending Social Events:** Many parents — even those who did not attend PTA meetings or volunteer — went to the school to see their own children perform (plays, programs, band practice, and musical performances). Children's excitement and desire to have their parents in the audience was added incentive for parents. Social events geared for the parents or the whole family (open houses, pot lucks) were also seen as low key social opportunities to gather with other families in the school.

■ **Overseeing Homework:** While a popular topic, parents differed in the extent to which they structured their children's completion of homework. Some did homework with their children each day and acted as a "teacher at home". Others felt their children could do homework on their own. Most parents had an opinion about homework, yet felt insecure about whether theirs was the right approach. They worried that their input might be impeding their child's learning, or felt they should not have to work with their children if the teacher was doing her job. Parents struggled with these issues, but did not mention discussing their concens with teachers nor did they mention whether the school provided them with clear feedback and guidance.

■ **Advocating on Behalf of their Child:** Whether advocating on behalf of a physically handicapped child or stepping in to address an academic concern, many parents felt it was their job to be their child's advocate within the school system. Parents felt that if they did not speak up for their child, no one would. According to parents, the teacher was there to help all children, but no one else was there to speak on behalf of their child. For example, a parent with a physically handicapped child became involved to change class attitudes about her son. • *I came immediately and let the teacher know what was going on with the children and I as his parent would not tolerate anything that interferes with his education.*

Other types of involvement discussed were attending parent programs and serving on advisory committees. Few parents mentioned serving in a decision-making capacity.

Reasons For Involvement

Parents shared their beliefs about the importance of being involved at the school and in their children's education.

■ **As Advocates:** Some parents became involved to address a problem between the school and their child. Parents felt strongly that they could advocate for their children because they were experts on their children, had knowledge that no one else had, and knew what their child was capable of.

■ **Something to Offer Teachers:** Parents felt that their insider knowledge about the children could also be of use to the teachers, not just when there was a conflict but on an ongoing basis. Parents were frustrated that there was no formal mechanism for the teachers to obtain information from parents about their child's learning styles, interests, and talents. As one parent of a special needs child noted: *The parent has the very knowledge the teacher needs…[to]make their job easier and give the children a better chance at success.*

■ **To Improve the School:** Many parents believed that their involvement made an important contribution to the school and thus improved the quality of their children's education. Photocopying, errands, and taking lunch orders were all seen as important and worthy activities for parent volunteers. Even parents who did not see themselves as having talent or interest in working directly with children in the classroom could make a contribution to their children's education.

"I want to show the kids that it's important, that school is very important to me. That's why I want to be visible here..."

■ **To Demonstrate the Value of Education:** Parents wanted to show their children that they valued education and saw the school as an important part of life. • *I want to show the kids that it's important, that school is very important to me. That's why I want to be visible here and show them that [it]is just a really important place for them.*

■ **To Reinforce Skills:** Many parents recognized the potential influence they can have on their child's education and learning. Parents felt it was important to be involved at home, seeing themselves as an equal partner in teaching the child. As one parent put it: *Well I think they expect us as parents to teach. Don't just stop when they get out of school. We have to work together as a team…when they leave one school it's like coming home to another school.* • *Of course the teachers can't speak and be with every child at school because there is not enough time. In my opinion parents have to spend as much [time] as they can with children and help them because they begin from the family not from the school.*

Barriers To Parent Involvement

Parents were aware that they were not as involved as they could be, speaking wistfully about wanting to be more involved and feeling disappointed about the school events and field trips they missed.

■ **Logistical Constraints:** Time, money, scheduling, transportation, child care, having younger children at home, and working outside the home all made it difficult for parents to volunteer or attend meetings at school. • *I work two jobs and to come to festivals. I have to request time off and then cover it with vacation. But I can't do that every time there's a meeting.*

■ **Schools Limit Involvement:** Parents felt that the school wanted their involvement if it was convenient and helpful for the school, such as attending fundraising events or field trips. They did not feel that the school was responsive to the parents' own ideas of what involvement meant to them. Some parents had negative experiences being involved and/or felt the school was not really interested in their involvement: • *They say they want parent involvement but a lot of times it's sort of like on their terms.* • *You can come and cook for the spaghetti dinner and come and work in the clinic. But as far as sitting on a committee and being heard about curricular issues. It doesn't have that impact.* • *As a parent if you come to the teacher because you have a question or something, the initial reaction is that you are interfering… that I'm stepping on their toes and I should just mind my own business.* Some parents had called the school to offer their services without hearing back.

■ **Children Limit Involvement:** Children were not always percieved as adequate carriers of important documents between administration and homes and often lost information sent home. • *The communication tends to break down as the kids get older.* Another parent agreed: *[kids] do not bring*

those notices home. They throw 'em out, they leave 'em in their locker, they crush 'em in their book bag. • And the kids don't give 'em to us. So something has went on and we don't know about it until it's over. And then the school thinks that we don't care...and then we think that they're not sending us notices, so it's a lack of communication back and forth.

"And the kids don't give 'em to us. So something has went on and we don't know about it until it's over. And then the school thinks that we don't care...and we think that they're not sending us notices, so it's a lack of communication back and forth."

Many parents felt that their children — especially older ones—did not want them involved. • *My son has kind of requested that if I'm going to help, that I not do it on his team.* • *I have the same problem. When [my daughter] was in grade school, I was active, but here she only wants me to bake her some goodies for the bake sale. Other than that, "Oh Mommy stay in the background."*

■ **Lack of Information:** Parents who were new to a school or had not yet been involved did not know how to find out how to become involved. Parents were uncertain or insecure about how and whom to approach to be involved. The PTA was one way to take on responsibilities and to hear about what was happening at the school. But those not involved in the PTA did not know of other avenues for initiating involvement.

School-Home Communication

The nature and extent of school-home communication generated much discussion among parents in the focus groups. Parents inferred a lot about the extent to which the school wanted parents to be involved by the ways schools reached out to families and parents in the community.

■ **Communication from Administration:** Schools primarily communicate with families through newsletters and reminder notices typically sent home with children. For the most part, parents felt positively about the school's attempts to inform them. • *I couldn't get too much information from the school.* A common complaint, though, was that such information was susceptible to being lost or mishandled. While parents appreciated ongoing communication, many felt swamped by the volume of paper sent home. One parent joked that it was a full-time job managing the paperwork that came home every day from her three children.

■ **Communication with the Teacher:** The child's homework and assignment books were a common way for teachers and parents to have an ongoing dialogue about the child's progress and needs. • *Every week the child brings home his notebook and the parent signs off on it. If there is any negative comment... it would be in the notebook. I may be able to catch it on a weekly basis and to me that is good communication between the parent and the teacher.* As with everything else, there was variation in parental satisfaction. • *Sometimes a parent will write a note and not get anything back from the teacher. So I think you need that communication going back and forth.*

Many parents would like more personal individualized contact — especially positive communication — with their child's teacher. The parents who had received positive calls from teachers were aware of the benefits of this special effort. • *I had an incident last year in second grade. Three weeks into the school year I got a phone call from this teacher. She called to say, "I'm just telling you that you have a wonderful son." And it felt so good to get a call like that.* • *I have gotten a call from my son's teacher on my answering machine; her words were, "Thank you for raising your son the way you have. He has made teaching a pleasurable experience."* However, many parents complained that they only heard from the teacher or school when there was a problem.

■ **Desire for Timely Notification of Problems:** Many parents felt that they were not informed of problems until it was too late, and inferred from this that the school did not care about their child's success. Parents viewed early notification as an opportunity to help their child catch up before he or she got too far behind. Parents — even those not typically involved — wanted the opportunity to intervene before it was too late. • *If there is a problem, I don't think it should wait for conference time or report cards... parents should be notified right away.* • *Whereas here your child could have gotten in trouble and you'd not even know about it until maybe like the 10th time and then you find out about it and by then you know they're ready to kick your kid out.* • *Yeah, they're doing fine. Then they come up with a D. You know, how fine were they doing when I talked to you?*

Facilitators Of Involvement

Parents spoke positively about their involvement in their child's school, highlighting situations which made it easier for them to be involved.

■ **School is welcoming:** Some parents were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about how welcome they felt at their child's school. • *A lot of schools don't want parents involved. This school expects it and they want it, you know, and they ask you for it.* • *You walk in and they're not looking at you like, "Why are you here?" They're looking at you like, "We're glad you're here."* • *It's a real open school for parents, you know. It's not just for the kids. It's for us too.*

■ **Schools Offer Services:** Being able to use the school's computer, media room, and copy machine; and participating in adult education programs created a sense of good will between parents and schools and helped make parents feel more comfortable being on the premises. Programs and services for children were also viewed positively by the parents. Anything the school did to make their lives easier or better was noted with appreciation.

"It's not even the parents as much as the children. The children just glow and just love it when their mom's here or their dad's here."

■ **Children Want Parental Involvement:** Some parents felt that their children really wanted them to be involved. • *I think he likes to have me around...They are just eating it up. And I am going to take every moment of it and spend it here.* Another parent commented: *It's not even the parents as much as the children. The children just glow and just love it when their mom's here or their dad's here.*

How Schools Could Be Different

Parents were asked to select three ways they would like to change how schools relate to parents and families. It was not difficult for parents to imagine ways to make their schools better. Even though the question was specifically focused on how schools relate to parents, parents' wish lists included several general suggestions for improving schools.

■ **Offer more services:** Several parents wished schools would offer children more services and programs. A nurse on staff, the building being open past school hours, more computers per child, more updated technology, extracurricular activities, and more support services were all popular suggestions. Parents wanted their children to have all the benefits that children who attended private school had.

■ **Better Communication:** Parents wanted to be informed if homework was missing so that it did not become a problem. Parents wanted to know if their child was not performing well before the report card or progress report indicated a significant problem. Parents wanted to know if their child was not behaving or performing well in school. •*I felt they went too long. She started getting As in math and slowly started slipping and then I got the slip when she slipped! When I spoke to the teacher he barely knew her... and said that by now it was too late, she'll probably get a D. So we tutored her anyway and she came home with a B+.*

Parents also wanted to hear good things about their children's performance and behavior — not just problems — what one parent called "Happy Calls." Another form of communication that parents wished for was personal contact with their child's teacher. • *We need a weekly meeting with parents and teachers and everybody can get together and try to solve these problems.* E-mail, homework hotlines, beepers, faxes, evening phone calls, and telephones in the classroom were all suggestions parents had for increasing teacher accessibility to the parents.

■ **Safer Schools:** All parents wanted their children to be safe and cared for when they sent them off to school. At a minimum they wanted the school building to be well maintained and they wanted their children to come home at the end of the day no worse than when they left in the morning. Parents wanted their children to be protected and nurtured as much as they wanted them taught and educated. • *I want to keep my child safe.* • *Complete safety for all the children. They'd make sure that the school was always a safe haven for the kids.* • *I don't want my child to see guns, I don't want her to see drugs, and I don't want her to see violence.*

■ **Be More Nurturing:** Parents wanted a warm, caring, nurturing, and supportive environment where their children are loved, respected, and appreciated for who they are. • *We were saying that the teacher and student relationship should be closer, more emotionally ...you know, "Good job!", nice pep talk ...you know, pat on the back, things like that, more supportive.* Another parent explained her wish this way: *The teacher needs to make numerous positive comments, especially individual comments because even though they are in middle school, they still have little baby hearts; they have not matured enough yet.*

"As parents we need to be able to just walk in and a teacher cannot tell us, 'you can't come.' You know, it's an open thing. It's up to you as a parent."

■ **Be More Welcoming:** Parents wanted to be respected when they made contact with the school. They didn't want to feel as if they were nuisances but rather as if they had something important to say. Parents wanted to be able to come to the school any time, not just for open house and parent teacher conferences, and they wanted to feel welcomed. • *As parents we need to be able to just walk in and a teacher cannot tell us, "you can't come." You know, it's an open thing. It's up to you as a parent.*

■ **Have More Individualized Instruction:** Parents wanted the teachers to individualize instruction, to pay more attention to the children who needed extra help, to provide more challenges for the children functioning at the top, and to be open to children's unique way of learning. Parents wanted more flexibility in what the teachers expected of their children and more attention from the teacher to help their children perform at their maximum potential. • *The teacher should recognize that your child needs more work and provide that for your child. I have a daughter who struggles so hard for just the homework she has. But your child who's much brighter, a teacher should somehow be able to differentiate and give more to the child that needs that extra challenge.*

■ **Have More Opportunities for Feedback:** Parents wanted the opportunity to provide input into teacher evaluations and wanted teachers to be accountable not just to the school system but also to the families. • *I feel that the feedback from the kids is missing now from all education systems.* • *I think the parents should be more knowledgeable about how they evaluate teachers.* • *It would be really fun to see what would happen if we started letting the kids make decisions about what it is they wanted to learn!*

Conclusion

Parents have had surprisingly little input into the national debate on parental involvement. There have been few opportunities for parents to meaningfully express their beliefs and share their opinions and ideas about this issue. Policies, programs, and practices have been developed based on others' notions of what parents want and what they need to be effective partners in their children's education.

The parents who participated in these 16 focus groups had strong feelings about the topic of parent involvement in their children's education. They shared instances when their involvement was a positive experience, and instances when their involvement was frustrating and disappointing. In situations where parent involvement was mandatory or clearly called for from the school, such as conferences, PTA meetings, school events, programs, and fund raisers, many parents tried to accommodate the school schedule even when it was a hardship.

There were also instances in which the parent was not invited but desired contact either to right a perceived wrong or to increase contact between home and school. Yet not all parents felt welcome or comfortable, and many felt the school did not appreciate their initiative. Participation was not perceived to be a two-way partnership. Many parents felt guilty that they could not be involved in ways encouraged by the school and angry that they could not be involved in ways they wanted but felt the school was not open to.

The parent focus groups provide an in-depth exploration of what parents are really thinking and feeling, and these discussions suggest many fruitful avenues for refining practice to be more in line with the realities of parent's lives. Only then can the promise of parent involvement become a reality.

Parents As School Partners
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Program Compilation: Replicable Programs to Enhance Parent Involvement
Child
Child
Child

For more information, please contact Dr. Amy Baker, Director, NCJW Center for the Child, 53 W. 23rd Street, New York, NY 10010 Ph: (212) 645-4048 Fax: (212) 645-7466

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Parents As School Partners

Teacher Focus Groups:

Voices From the Field

NCJW CENTER FOR THE Child

Thanks to the following NCJW Sections who conducted focus groups:

Akron (OH)	Gr. Miami (FL)
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The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) is a 90,000 member volunteer organization with a one-hundred year history of community service, advocacy, research, and education. NCJW's Center for the Child was founded in 1983 to conduct research to improve programs and policies for children and their families.

The Issue

There is widespread consensus that parent involvement is a key component for the school success of America's children. Based on this belief, policies are currently being enacted to promote and increase parent involvement at all levels of schooling. Therefore, partnerships will be forged between homes, schools, and communities with an unparalled level of contact between parents and educators. It is surprising that teachers have had few opportunities to share their unique and valuable perspectives about what parent involvement means to them and what they need to make these partnerships work.

To address this issue, NCJW Sections around the country conducted focus groups with teachers to hear from the "voices from the field" about parent involvement. Focus groups were also conducted with parents and principals. The focus groups were one of four activities of ***Parents As School Partners,*** NCJW's volunteer research and action initiative exploring parent involvement to promote children's school success.

The Focus Groups

Fourteen focus groups were conducted by 12 NCJW Sections nationwide. Teacher participants were invited through random selection procedures. Each focus group was audiotaped and followed a similar format, which included: an introduction; signing of consent forms; opening, main and summary questions; and completion of participant background information forms. Questions addressed types of contact parents have with schools, the conditions under which certain types of contact occur, their beliefs about parent involvement, and their perception of the school's interest in and attitudes toward involvement.

The Sections

Twelve NCJW Sections conducted focus groups with teacher participants. These Sections were diverse in size and geography. NCJW volunteers received training through individual consultation, site visits, an in-depth *How-to Guide*, a *Partners in Progress* newsletter, and ongoing intensive technical assistance.

The Teacher Participants

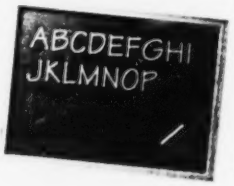
Eleven of the focus groups were held with elementary school teachers; two with middle school teachers; and one with high school teachers. In total, there were 87 teacher participants: 73 from elementary schools, eight from middle schools, and six from high schools.

• Highlights •

- It is often difficult for teachers to contact parents as they usually cannot leave their classrooms to make phone calls or have meetings.
- Teachers want parents to reinforce academic and disciplinary recommendations.
- Teachers believe parents of older children need to be as involved as those of younger children.
- Teachers have little personal contact with parents, and what contact they do have is on school premises.
- There appears to be little consensus about the benefits of involvement. Each teacher has his/her own ideas.
- Many teachers do not feel that parents respect them as professionals.
- Involving parents requires significant effort on the part of teachers.
- Teachers feel that some parents do not want honest feedback about their child's performance.

What Teachers Had To Say

Teachers' discussions were transcribed verbatim from the audio tapes. These transcripts were read and analyzed for content, resulting in six general categories of issues discussed by teachers:



- Ways Teachers Want Parents to be Involved
- Barriers to Involvement
- School-Home Communication
- Benefits of Involvement
- How Teachers Encourage Parent Involvement
- How Parent-Teacher Relationships Could Be Different

The following pages present teachers' perspectives on these six themes and include quotes highlighting key issues raised. The **Parents As School Partners** *project also included focus groups with parents and principals. Please refer to these reports for a fuller understanding of the issues raised.*

Ways Teachers Want Parents To Be Involved

Teachers talked about what types of involvement they asked of parents and had definite ideas about the frequency and nature of involvement.

■ **Support Teachers:** Teachers wanted parents to support them in efforts to educate their children. They asked that parents support them as professionals who had their child's best interest at heart. Teachers wanted to feel as if they were on the same team as parents, and wanted parents to follow through on what teachers asked of them, to pick up where the teachers left off. • *It is important to support the teachers and their decisions for homework and encourage their children to do what they are asked to do.* • *If we're giving assignments, or we're doing projects in the room all we really ask for is that the parents support us. If the kids are misbehaving, if we call, give us some satisfaction.*

■ **Be Informed:** Teachers wanted parents to come to the school more often, see what the children were doing, have open communication with the teacher about their child, and be involved with the child's education in any way that would be beneficial. They asked that parents come to school to observe the class, read the newsletters and school and class information, and inform teachers if there was something special going on with the child that might be useful in understanding the child's behavior. • *I would want them involved in their child's education, come in the classroom, see what's going on, follow-up with them, come back in…that's all I ask.* • *I ask that they just find out what they are doing on a daily basis, that they take an active involvement in finding out and participating in any way that they can to help their own child in the schools.*

I would want them involved in their child's education, come in the classroom, see what's going on, follow-up with them, come back in… that's all I ask.

■ **Help Children with Homework:** While not all teachers wanted the parents to assist with homework content, they wanted the parents to monitor and ensure that it was completed and sent to school. They wanted parents to care about whether homework was completed, to convey to the child that home and school were working together to support the child's education. Several teachers noted that parents did not know how much to correct their child's work and how much to let children make their own mistakes. • *We ask a lot of judgment of the parents…we want them to still help with homework, but we also want them to encourage their children to be building independence and responsibility.*

■ **Send Children to School Ready to Learn:** Teachers wanted parents to teach their child values, proper behavior and social skills so they did not have to devote school time to teaching the children these basic skills. • *I ask parents to send their child ready to learn and that entails a number of things. Being healthy, having been well rested the night before, dressed to learn, nourished, not full of candy. That's before they even get the first lesson.* • *Give them confidence so when they come in they see themselves as winners, as able and competent.* • *I want that parent to talk to that child, and love their child…talk to him, listen to him, hug him a lot.*

■ **Have High Expectations for their Children's School Success:** Teachers wanted parents to have high expectations for their child and to encourage their children to learn and achieve. • *You have to convince some parents that their children can do better and that they should plant these seeds, not just the teachers.* Another teacher added: *Parents have to help plant that seed. We're not the only seed planters.*

A few teachers mentioned asking parents for concrete assistance such as making donations to the classroom for special projects or helping with transportation on field trips.

Barriers To Involvement

Teachers spoke of several barriers to increased parental involvement.

■ **Logistical Barriers:** Teachers were aware of the logistical barriers parents faced in being involved, particularly on the school premises. Transportation, work schedules, insufficient time for scheduled conferences, and their inability to access parents, were several of the logistical barriers limiting parent involvement. One teacher, a mother herself, sadly noted that she had to miss many opportunities to be involved at her child's school in order to fulfill her obligations as a teacher.

■ **Parents Don't Know How to Be Involved:** Teachers also noted that many parents wanted to be more involved in their child's education but did not seem to know how to make that happen. • *And we know that they really want the best for their kids but a lot of times they don't know how. That's a real stumbling block for us to help them help their kids.* Teachers wanted parents to provide support and structure, which they realized many parents may not have the skills or confidence to be able to do. For example, even when some parents knew how to solve homework problems themselves, they were not necessarily able to explain the process to their children.

■ **Children Limit Involvement:** Teachers noted that, as children matured, they did not want their parents in the classroom or even in the school. Some teachers recognized that preadolescent children were easily embarrassed by their parents and wanted the experience of independence and separation. Parents, too, may limit their involvement at school if they perceive it as too difficult for their child to handle.

■ **Parent Burn-Out and Discouragement:** Many teachers discussed that parents of older children appeared less involved than parents of younger children, and that parents of later born children were less involved than parents of first born or only children. The teachers believed that as children got older, their parents became "burnt out" from earlier involvement, and that the older the child, the less motivated and interested the parent was in their education. • *The parents are less discouraged at the lower grades especially if it is their first child. For the first day of school we have everybody bringing their kids. They are standing at the door with them and then ...they send 'em out a little more and each year, they give 'em more independence until by the time they're in sixth grade they've given them all the independence you need. In fact, "Don't call me unless he does something wrong."*

■ **Schools Limit Involvement:** Most teachers believed that parents were welcome in the school, and only a few teachers mentioned that parental involvement was limited by the quality of the interaction between schools and homes. Some teachers did feel, though, that certain school practices to protect children, such as having to check in at the office, having to wear a visitors pass, and having to schedule specific times to observe the classroom, may in fact be impediments to involvement by the parents. Some teachers said that not all teachers and schools were as welcoming as parents might want them to be. Other teachers commented that while the school might try to be welcoming, many parents have had their own negative experiences as students which made them hesitant to be involved in their child's school. • *Some parents are very much in avoidance of contact with schools because they do not perceive schools as a positive place.*

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School-Home Communication

Teachers emphasized school-home communication as an important element of parent involvement.

■ **Scheduled Meetings and Conferences:** Teachers felt that general orientation meetings and individualized parent-teacher conferences were important ways to inform parents about school rules and expectations, as well as about issues with their child. A major complaint, however, was that many parents did not attend these meetings, which was interpreted as lack of interest in the child's education. Most teachers felt that while parents may have barriers to participation, parents could get to a meeting if they really wanted to.

■ **Informal Meetings:** Informal meetings between parents and teachers typically occurred when a parent was already on the premises, volunteering in the class, or dropping off/picking up the child. While teachers did not want to be expected to meet with parents who dropped by informally, if the timing was right they could spend a few minutes with the parent. Such opportunities for informal meetings were seen as a secondary benefit of parent involvement in the class.

■ **Phone Calls:** Teachers discussed the many advantages of calling parents — to introduce themselves, to share with the parents their expectations for the upcoming year, to remind parents of special events, to discuss behavioral concerns, or to provide positive feedback to the parent. • *What I do at the beginning of the school year is I take time to call every one of my parents. . .I let them know what my expectations are and what I'd like for them to do to help me.* • *I really get a good response when I call somebody who has never been called for anything good. And after that the student seems to really buckle down.* Most teachers did not have access to telephones and found evenings a more conducive time to reach parents. However, those teachers with telephones in their classrooms reported benefits of being able to reach a parent immediately.

"I really get a good response when I call somebody who has never been called for anything good. And after that the student seems to really buckle down."

■ **Home Visits:** Only a few teachers reported making home visits, due to lack of time as well as to the dangerous living conditions of some of the families.

■ **Written Reports/Updates:** Teachers mentioned that portfolio assessments, report cards, and progress reports were sent home to inform parents of their child's progress throughout the school year. While schools and teachers varied in the frequency of the information sent home, many teachers felt that corrected homework assignments also provided parents with information about the child's curriculum and progress. Some teachers also sent home daily notes to the parents about the child's behavior. Teachers generally felt that they communicated regularly and sufficiently with parents regarding their child's school performance. • *. . .we communicate with the parents a great deal. We send a lot of written information home and ask for a signature on it.* • *We send behavior forms home. Any behavior problems are indicated and then that's signed on a weekly basis so that the parent should be aware of their academic progress as well as behavior progress on at least a weekly basis.* • *We do communicate a lot in written form with the parents and so whether they really take the time to read it or not we really don't know.* Teachers felt that it was important for parents to know what to expect for the upcoming year so they could be involved and helpful to the child. They reported sending a considerable amount of information to parents and wondered if any of it made a difference or if parents read or made use of the information.

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Benefits Of Involvement

Teachers reported asking a lot of parents because they perceived important benefits to parental involvement in their children's education.

■ **Involvement in the Child's Education at Home:** Teachers acknowledged that they cannot do their job alone — they need parents to teach their child, help with their homework, read to their child, take their child to the library, and make learning an everyday activity. This home involvement and support was viewed by teachers as critical to what they were trying to accomplish during the schoolday. Parental involvement makes their job easier while also providing children with a better foundation of skills and knowledge. • *Parental support is a necessity, really.... I think that the school would be a lot better if we had more parental support for what goes on in school.* • *The ones that are read to may not be the first reader but they get there... they have the interest.* • *I have to tell [the parents] that I can't do it alone. I cannot educate your children all by myself. I need attention to homework.* • *It can make a tremendous difference for the child just how involved the parent is.*

■ **Involvement in the Classroom and the Building:** Teachers perceived that parent involvement benefitted teachers, the classroom, and the school in several different ways. First, when parents volunteered in their child's class, teachers believed they were sending a powerful message to the child about the value of education. Secondly, involvement provided opportunities for increased contact between teachers and parents, allowing the teacher to pay additional attention to the child's progress and offering the chance for parents and teachers to develop trust and rapport. • *It's hard to be making phone calls all the time because lots of times they're not home when you call them. So, if they're coming in and you get to see them from time to time, you have that opportunity to talk to them.* • *You end up having many, many*

conferences and talking with the parent about how the child's doing or "Bo's so excited about the farm day coming up" Or something like that. In addition, some teachers explicitly provided parenting tips to parents who volunteered. • *Sometimes as teachers we find ourselves ...making suggestions to parents if they are having difficulties with their children. And giving extra ideas that a parent can work with the child at home ....* Teachers also thought that parent involvement would make parents better understand and respect their role. • *I think that if parents were more involved, did come to school and did see what we do, then they would treat us as this professional person who's up there trying to better my child's education, trying to help my child as opposed to this bad guy, this teacher who's always calling me about him or her not finishing their homework or not behaving in class.* Lastly, teachers mentioned that parental help in their child's class, and in the school building as lunchroom aides, librarians, and playground assistants, made an important contribution to the school. Without parents taking on these roles, the jobs would not get done.

"If parents were more involved, did come to school and did see what we do, then they would treat us as this professional person who's up there trying to better my child's education..."

■ **Involvement Addressing Specific Issues:** In addition to benefits of ongoing involvement, teachers also felt involvement was critical in addressing problems when they occurred. Phone calls with parents enabled teachers to get immediate feedback about a discipline issue. Teachers wanted to be able to access parents the moment a problem arose in order to maintain control in their classroom. They believed that simply the specter of parents hearing about misconduct helped the children behave better.

• *...We've taught them how to dial 9 and dial their own parents...." Now you have to call her at home and tell her what you did!"*

Teachers were aware that children move between the two worlds of school and home and that these worlds rarely came together. Children have a great deal of control over the information sent home from school, and teachers believed that children did not always convey this information accurately. Further, teachers felt that many parents were quick to assume that teachers are out to hurt their child or wield authority unfairly. To these teachers, then, communication between home and school was useful to the extent that such misunderstandings and miscommunications could be clarified.

"It can make a tremendous difference for the child just how involved the parent is."

How Teachers Encourage Parent Involvement

Teachers discussed ways they tried to increase involvement and encourage parents to be a part of their children's education.

■ **Special Projects:** Teachers tried to attract parent involvement with special projects in hopes that, once inside the classroom, parents would see that their involvement was fun, important, and beneficial. • *I think projects bring parents into the classroom in a non-direct way. Early in the year we announce projects we'll have throughout the year and to send materials in — wrapping paper tubes for when we make the Parthenon... Well, the parents like to bring them in and they also like to stick around and construct the thing in class!* Teachers also tried to make coming to school easy and convenient for parents. •*I have an open door policy. I like to grab them anytime that I can. I want them to be involved. I want them to see what I am doing with their kids. I want them to know what their kids are learning.*

"I have an open door policy. I like to grab them anytime that I can. I want them to be involved. I want them to see what I am doing with their kids. I want them to know what their kids are learning."

■ **Persistence:** Some teachers mentioned being persistent, writing notes home requesting help, calling to remind parents that they promised to participate in a certain event or project, and providing several different opportunities for involvement. The teachers, especially those who perceived strong benefits to the children and school of parent involvement, tried any way to get parents in the door. • *Just pleading, being pathetic you know just...you need them, you can't do without them.* • *Sort of not taking no for an answer, being a real nudge.*

■ **Formal Volunteer Programs:** Some teachers mentioned parent volunteer programs within their schools in which parents could come and sign up for different volunteer opportunities. Other teachers mentioned trying to make sure that classroom tasks for parents were manageable and within their skill and interest level, so that they would have a positive and successful experience. One teacher had a table with projects for parents to work on any time they came into her classroom. The projects were simple tasks so that any parent could do them and all parents could make a contribution and feel good about their involvement.

■ **Creating Positive Relationships:** Teachers emphasized the importance of creating a positive relationship with parents as a way to increase and improve their involvement. • *You start off calling for good reasons so when you have to call for the bad ones, you already know I care about your child ... and then they can't help but listen to you when you say you have a problem about something.* Calling parents to share ongoing positive feedback about the child was seen as an effective parent involvement motivator, not just to establish rapport before a discipline problem arose, but also as a way to excite the parent about their child's progress. Some teachers, aware that the majority of contact with the parent was around problems, negative feedback, discipline, or academic issues, discussed the benefits of making regular positive contact with the parents. Newsletters about exciting classroom projects and activities also enabled teachers to have non-problem and non-issue focused interactions with parents..

Teachers also mentioned trying to be respectful of parents, acting naturally, and being warm and friendly towards them in order to make the parents at ease in their presence. Thanking the parents and praising their efforts to be involved, be it at home or in the classroom, was also a tool for building rapport. • *Praising them, sending them thank you notes absolutely all the time as soon as they've done something.* When one teacher was asked how she tried to increase parent involvement in her classroom, she said: *Well you tell them what they are doing right.* Some teachers understood the importance of positive feedback and reinforcement and applied that to their work with parents.

■ **Joint Problem-Solving:** Joint problem-solving was also discussed as a method of improving parent involvement. When problems arose, some teachers asked parents to participate in problem-solving in hopes that the parent would be more likely to implement agreed upon action steps. As one teacher noted, teachers cannot tell parents what to do with their children outside of school hours, even when it comes to handling homework. • *I think the problem and the solution has to be discussed with the parent because everybody's got a different lifestyle and everybody works differently with their children within their family. So, I think [we could say]... "This child has to be able to come back with his homework. How can we, according to the way you are living, how can we help this child, you know, get their work done."*

How Parent-Teacher Relationships Could Be Different

Teachers were asked what could be different in the ways parents related to them.

■ **Improved Communication Between Home and School:** Some teachers envisioned communication in which parents would provide feedback to the teachers about how their parent involvement feels. • *If they are coming for some lesson or something and they just sit down and then walk out. I want to know some reaction…Instead of just wondering what is going on in their minds.* Other teachers wished that parents would share information about the child's home life to provide a context for the child's behavior or performance. • *If there is a problem you need to share it with me. I need to know what is happening because it does affect what they're doing.* Other teachers wanted ongoing communication to support the child's academic work and to clear up misunderstandings that the children might inadvertently be creating between the parent and teacher. • *Normal contact. I'd like to be able to call and say, "Barry was late to class today. Can you please talk to him?" Or, "Sue got her homework done today and I really appreciate you helping her."* • *Just keep the lines of communication open.*

■ **More Involvement on the Part of the Parent:** Teachers wanted the parents to be more involved in their children's lives, to know what they were doing in school, to know who their friends were, and what their interests were. When they spoke of more involvement, they meant more active and concerned parenting which they believed would lead to more involvement in the child's education and schooling. •*If it was up to me it would be mandatory that a parent comes to the school at least once a month to meet with the teacher.* Teachers also wanted parents to be actively involved in the school, to initiate contact with teachers, to offer help and support, to ask questions and let teachers know when something is bothering them or their child. Many teachers also specifically mentioned a desire for more father involvement in the schools.

■ **More Positive Attitude Towards Teachers:** Teachers generally felt that parents were mistrustful and suspicious of them, and not always appreciative of their efforts. They complained that parents did not really understand that teachers needed to address the concerns of all children in the class, not just their child. If parents were pleased, teachers also wanted to be thanked for their time and effort. If parents were displeased, teachers wanted an opportunity for dialogue about their concerns. It saddened them that parents assumed the worst as it reflected a fundamental lack of trust and good will between homes and schools. Many teachers mentioned wanting to be treated as trained professionals who knew what they were doing. •*I would like parents to show respect to our profession. We grew up in a time where what the teacher said was right. Kids knew if they got in trouble they also had to be accountable at home and we don't see a lot of that. We're pretty low on the totem pole.*

■ **Parents Be More Willing to Hear Problems and Criticism:** Teachers wanted to be able to openly discuss problems with parents without being attacked. They wanted parental support if the child was having adjustment, behavioral, or attitude problems. Teachers wanted parents to back them up. • *We cannot do it alone. We need the help …and support of the parents.*

■ **Following Through on Addressing Problems:** As well as being more willing to hear about problems, teachers also wanted parents involved in following through. Teachers complained that if children knew there were no consequences to bad behavior, then the behavior would not improve. Teachers also knew that a child who was falling behind needed help outside of school to catch up — and they saw parent involvement in this area as critical. • *I would like to see the parents not being so negative when you tell them about their child, because they must realize that the child has a problem… and getting angry… is not going to help. It's only going to make things worse.* • *…if your child has a problem, it is better that you address it and …just deal with it…Blame shouldn't be put on anyone. The focus should be on the solution.* • *You need follow-up. Not just the teachers but the parents to follow through with what they say…that is all year long.*

Conclusion

Teachers have had surprisingly little input into the national debate on parental involvement and few opportunities to meaningfully express their beliefs and share opinions about this issue. Policies, programs, and practices have been developed based on others' notions of what teachers want and need to work effectively with parents.

The 87 teachers who participated in these 14 focus groups had strong feelings about parent involvement. They shared instances when involvement was a positive experience and also when it was frustrating and disappointing. Teachers appreciated parents who followed through on academic and discipline decisions and who trusted and respected them as professionals who have their children's best interests at heart. They also had experiences when they perceived parents as not caring about their children's education and not open to criticism and suggestions. In all cases, parent involvement required time and effort by teachers — to make phone calls, write notes home, and work with parent volunteers — over and above their many teaching obligations. Parent involvement was not built into their regular teaching routine.

These teacher focus groups provide an in-depth exploration into what teachers are really thinking and feeling. The results suggest fruitful avenues for refining practice to be more in line with the realities of teachers' jobs. Only then can the promise of parent involvement become a reality.

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Parents As School Partners

School Principal Focus Groups:

Voices From the Field

NCJW CENTER FOR THE Child

Thanks to the following NCJW Sections who conducted focus groups:

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The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) is a 90,000 member volunteer organization with a one–hundred year history of community service, advocacy, research, and education. NCJW's Center for the Child was founded in 1983 to conduct research to improve programs and policies for children and their families.

The Issue

There is widespread consensus that parent involvement is a key component for the school success of America's children. Based on this belief, policies are currently being enacted to promote and increase parent involvement at all levels of schooling. Therefore, partnerships will be forged between homes, schools, and communities with an unparalled level of contact between parents and educators. It is surprising that school principals have had few opportunities to share their unique and valuable perspectives about what parent involvement means to them and what they need to make these partnerships work.

To address this issue, NCJW Sections conducted focus groups with principals to hear from the "voices from the field" about parent involvement. Focus groups were also conducted with parents and teachers. The focus groups were one of four activities of ***Parents As School Partners,*** NCJW's volunteer research and action initiative exploring parent involvement to promote children's school success.

The Focus Groups

Three focus groups were conducted by three NCJW Sections. Principal participants were invited through random selection procedures. Each focus group was audiotaped and followed a similar format, which included: an introduction; signing of consent forms; opening, main, and summary questions; and completion of participant background information forms. Questions addressed types of contact parents have with schools, the conditions under which certain types of contact occur, and their beliefs about parent involvement.

The Sections

Three NCJW Sections conducted focus groups with principal participants. NCJW volunteers received training through individual consultation, site visits, an in-depth *How-to Guide*, a *Partners in Progress* newsletter, and ongoing intensive individualized technical assistance.

The School Principal Participants

The principal focus groups were conducted with a total of sixteen principals. The principals represented a range of experience in their jobs, serving in their positions from one to ten years.

The Findings

Principals' discussions from the three focus groups were transcribed verbatim from the audio tapes. These transcripts were read and analyzed for content. Given the small number of focus groups, the data base was somewhat restricted. Two topics emerged as central to principals' concerns about the issue of parent involvement.

The following pages present principals' perspectives on these topics and include quotes highlighting key issues raised. The ***Parents As School Partners*** *Project also included focus groups with parents and teachers. Please refer to these reports for a fuller understanding of the issues raised.*

• Highlights •

- Principals appreciate parent volunteer programs as a way to formalize volunteerism in the school and create respect for parents.
- Principals recognize that parents face many stresses and demands which may affect their ability to be involved.
- Principals sometimes feel overwhelmed with their increased responsibilities in trying to address the basic needs of their families.
- Principals experience many parents as primarily problem-focused, issue-oriented, and negative.
- Principals acknowledge that teachers and parents do not always have shared agendas.

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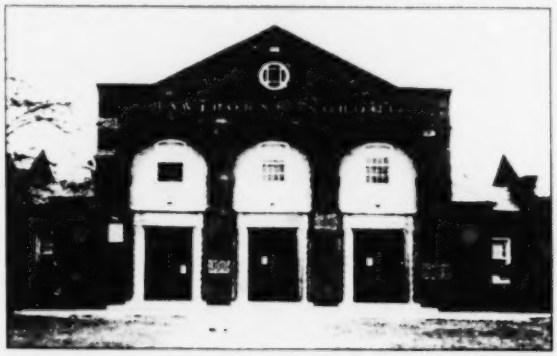
Types Of Involvement

Principals spoke of several ways parents could be involved at the school and at home.

■ **Parents Assisting in the School:** Principals spoke of parents assisting as classroom volunteers or as aides in non-classroom settings (e.g., on the bus, in the cafeteria, in the library). Some schools had formal programs for assigning parents to volunteer positions. Principals felt these programs effectively involved parents and served to professionalize volunteerism, bring parents into the school more regularly, increase parents' visibility within the school, and show parents they were needed and valued. Principals shared the view that parents should not only volunteer in their own child's class but volunteer in order to benefit the entire school. Principals wanted parents to volunteer only if they would support all children and take an active role in enhancing the school — not if they were just checking up on their child's teacher or giving their child extra assistance and support.



"We feel that way we pull parents into the school because...it will eliminate the fear of coming to school and...once they get there there's always someone who will say, 'Oh. I need to talk about this'. Or, 'I want a conference about this.'"

■ **Formal Parent Organizations:** The PTA and PTO, a common type of involvement mentioned by all of the principals, were generally regarded positively. • *[The parent groups] provide things for the school itself...We have a computer set up in every classroom that was provided by the parent groups. There are problems and we present the problems, the things that we look for and then they help us afford it. They've been very good.* However, one principal noted that in his school the parent organization was more interested in extra curricular activities than in academics. • *They'll build a playground for us if we ask them for it but to get them to commit to making money so we can insert the new science curriculum model, that's an entirely different thing... We have a mandate, a task which is to educate these kids. And I always want to put that first.* Relationships between principals and parent groups varied from school to school; in some cases there was a shared mission and close working relationship, and in others, the parent group set their own agenda and carried it out independent of the principal.

■ **Social Events and Orientation Nights:** Principals believed that it was important to get parents "in the door" of the school and that it would be easier for parents to come to the school after a pleasant initial contact. Principals sensed a certain amount of resistance from parents to coming to their children's schools and believed that if they could get parents to attend a social event, they might later volunteer or attend a meeting if needed. • *One of the things we've also found effective is to do some things that will bring the parents into the school to see their kid...We feel that way we pull parents into the school because...it will eliminate the fear of coming to school and...once they get there there's always someone who will say, "Oh. I need to talk about this". Or, "I want a conference about this."*

■ **Communication with Parents:** Principals mentioned several ways schools communicated with and reached out to parents, including phone calls, home visits, and written materials sent home. Phone calls and home visits allowed schools to have individualized contact with parents to address specific issues about their child. Written materials, viewed as an ongoing tool to keep parents involved in the educational process, focused on upcoming events, classroom progress reports, and district wide activities. In most cases, information was sent home with children in their school bags. Principals mentioned using these materials as a way of responding to concerns raised by parents. For example, when a parent complained about school lunches, the principal wrote an article in the school newsletter about how lunch menus were planned.

Challenges to Parent Involvement

Principals discussed several challenges to parent involvement, focussing on parents as the major stumbling block to greater and more effective parent involvement.

Principals discussed six ways in which parents create challenges for parental involvement.

■ **Advocating Only for their Own Children:** Principals complained that many parents were only involved to advocate on behalf of their children around particular issues, not better the school as a whole or rally around positive issues. Such a focus on negativity left a bad impression on the schools as they did not feel that parents had a vested interest in anyone other than their own child. •*I don't think it would hurt if parents could get into a regular form of communication that's not always issue oriented. Most parents do not talk to their kids' teachers unless it's about some flash point. And usually it's a negative one…that puts a real negative taste in the mouths of teachers.* Another principal added: *From our end we really attempt to have standardized contact. But from the parents' end to us it's almost always issue-based. I never get a phone call from a parent to see what's going on. I always get a phone call from a parent about something in particular and usually it means something that isn't going their way.*

■ **Parental Apathy:** Some principals lamented that many parents did not see themselves as having any role in their child's education. They felt that some parents, who did not seem to care about their child's educational success and who failed to follow through in supporting the teacher, were leaving the child's education and behavior solely in the hands of schools. One principal wished that parents would question him more. •*…Parents don't ask me these questions. And truly, I'd feel a whole lot better if they did take me to task on this, if they did say you know, "How come my child didn't pass?"…I truly wish that the parents took this seriously and put the effort into providing their kids with support.*

> ***"My parents are more interested in our providing the basic needs. As sad as that is, they are much more worried about that free lunch being lost than a lost homework paper."***

■ **Cultural Diversity Within School Community:** Principals cited diversity among parents within a school community as another challenge to parent involvement. Barriers due to diversity included communicating with parents in different languages, translating written materials into other languages, and parents failing to relate to one another because of diverse backgrounds. Further, principals claimed that some cultures did not emphasize parent advocacy and involvement with their children's education.

■ **Social and Economic Challenges:** Principals viewed many parents as overwhelmed by their social and economic circumstances. For many parents, a focus on survival needs such as food and shelter took precedence over seeing that homework was done. One principal noted that the turnover rate in his school was 50% over the course of the year. He believed that parents and children who moved frequently had less ties to schools and were harder to engage. Principals also believed that poor working parents seemed to have little time for involvement at school and little energy for involvement with the child's education at home. •*My parents are more interested in our providing basic needs. As sad as that is, they are more worried about that free lunch being lost than a lost homework paper. I mean they'll call up the counselor in a heartbeat to get a shoe voucher, but let a teacher try to get some support on a homework issue…* •*Again, this is coming from issues sometimes when their poverty is real high, …. all the things we are asking [them to] check to see that homework is done, read to your child and all that stuff. They don't have rent. They don't have food. They don't have beds.* Principals noted that while the structure of schools has not changed in a hundred years, demands on schools have continued to rise steadily, with schools now taking on social service and mental health roles in addition to academic and educational ones. Principals were disheartened that living conditions impeded children's being ready to learn and got in the way of parents supporting and nurturing their children. The additional demands on schools took time, effort, and resources which these principals would rather allocate for educational purposes.

■ **Permissiveness:** Principals were distressed that many parents did not hold their children to high standards or provide them with support and assistance to reach those standards. While principals noted how poverty

challenged parents, they did not only see poor parenting in low-income families in their schools. Rather they noted a trend in society for children to have more power within a family and parents to have less control over their children. •*One of the basic problems...I believe centers around a clash of values. The school possesses and nurtures a set of values: hard work, honesty, dependability, respect for rules, respect for authority, good attendance, and peaceful resolution of conflicts. Many of our parents do not share those values and it becomes a significant problem in parents becoming positively involved with the school.* • *I have families come to me and say, "I need help with my child. What do I do? I can't handle him any more?" and I've seen it with five-year-olds.* • *One of my concerns is helping parents be parents and I guess maybe getting into the role of what parenting is. This would be a tremendous help for children these days. ..And I would like to think ...along with parental involvement in school, the school could help the parents in their role of parenting...which in turn would help us be better able to work with the children in school.*

■ **Parents Have Difficulty Hearing Criticism About their Children:** Principals reported that many parents were defensive and angry about criticism of their child's work or behavior and were unwilling to support the school in efforts to modify the child's behavior or performance. •*It is very hard to tell the parent when their child is doing not only poorly grade wise but doing poorly in behavior and they go hand in hand. And that can be difficult to tell a parent...the child continues to be the loser.* Some parents are also perceived as not valuing and respecting the expertise of the teachers and other professionals within the school system. Principals cited parents who questioned the curriculum and professional judgment of teachers. •*Nor would they question the techniques used by their doctor, but they will certainly question the techniques of you or of your teacher, which is sort of sad in a way in that often parents don't look upon teachers as being professionals at what they do...And I think parents ought to be*

> ***"Neither side often wants to hear what the other one has to say...and it can get pretty heated...."***

respecting what we do and respecting our skills and abilities. Part of the issue appears to be that parents are not seen as accepting their child's limitations. • *Ours want all of their kids to be geniuses. I mean literally, we don't have an average student at this school.* • *...They can't all play sports, and the parents don't expect sports out of all of them. They can't all be great musicians and they're satisfied...However, they should all get A's.* These high expectations do not always transfer into the support and assistance for the child's education that schools believe are helpful (i.e., assisting with homework, providing a time and space for work to get done, following through on teacher recommendations).

Principals also felt that some parents did not support the school's level of expectations for the child. For example, some parents complained that school-aged children were too young to be transferring information home, or that the school's discipline techniques were too harsh. In general, principals felt that parents always took the child's perspective in disputes between home and school. Principals wanted parents to follow through on discipline and academic expectations and felt that often parents undermined the work of the schools by coddling their children and taking their side. Principals wanted parents to trust schools rather than assume the child was always telling the truth about how he or she was victimized by the school system. As one principal put it: *Neither side often wants to hear what the other one has to say...and it can get pretty heated....* Principals saw the situation as one with sides, with the parents on one side and the principals and teachers on the other. Each side had an agenda and fixed ideas about the other side's agenda. Principals were keenly aware that this does not lend itself to effective and positive parental involvement.

Additional barriers cited by principals included:

■ **Administrative and logistical barriers:** Working with parents from different ethnic backgrounds with limited English, lack of access to telephones for teachers to call parents during the day, and the huge effort to communicate with parents through newsletters and phone calls were also barriers mentioned as challenges to parent involvement.

■ **Teachers' Difficulty Relating Positively to Parents:** A few of the principals mentioned that some teachers had difficulty relating positively to parents. • *Well, a lot of teachers come in there with their boxing gloves on.* • *I think we have to help teachers understand the mores of families. And they don't have the background to relate [or] don't know how to... they don't have an understanding ...about culture, economic level. But teachers really need training on understanding how to be sensitive and interact positively.*

Conclusion

The principals who participated in these focus groups had strong feelings about parent involvement. They shared instances when parent involvement was a positive experience for them and when it was frustrating and negative. They believed that parent involvement was vital to childrens' school success and that families were both key in shaping the development and education of children and a rich and valuable resource to the entire school community.

At the same time, there were some built-in tensions in the school-home relationship. Some principals felt that many parents were angry and confrontational in their dealings with schools. Principals also recognized that while teachers and parents may have a shared mission to educate children, they do not necessarily have a shared understanding of how to best achieve that goal. Many principals were aware of the increased stress and demands placed on parents due to social and economic circumstances which made parent involvement less of a priority and more difficult to achieve.

The principal focus groups explored what principals are really thinking and feeling and the results suggested fruitful avenues for refining practice to be more in line with what schools can really accomplish. Only then can the promise of parent involvement become a reality.

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For more information, please contact Dr. Amy Baker, Director, NCJW Center for the Child, 53 W. 23rd Street, New York, NY 10010 Ph: (212) 645-4048 Fax: (212) 645-7466

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Parents As School Partners

School District Superintendents Survey:

Parent Involvement Policies, Programs & Practices

NCJW CENTER FOR THE Child

Thanks to the following NCJW Sections who conducted the surveys:

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The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) is a 90,000 member volunteer organization with a one-hundred year history of community service, advocacy, research, and education. NCJW's Center for the Child was founded in 1983 to conduct research to improve programs and policies for children and their families.

The Issue

There is widespread consensus that parent involvement is a key component for the school success of America's children. Based on this widely held belief, policies are currently being enacted to promote and increase parent involvement at all levels of schooling. For such policies to be successful, district superintendents will need to provide vision, leadership, and sometimes pressure. It is surprising, therefore, that little is known about district level policies and practices to promote and support parent involvement.

To address this issue, NCJW Sections around the country surveyed school district superintendents about the existence of district level parent involvement policies and the programs and practices implementing these policies. The survey project was one of four activities of NCJW's ***Parents As School Partners*** volunteer research initiative exploring parent involvement to promote children's school success.

The Survey

The survey addressed six areas of parent involvement policy: providing parents with opportunities to be decision-makers; communicating with parents about how to help their children succeed in school; reaching out to diverse families; training staff to work with parents; communicating with parents about their child's progress; and providing links to social services. Superintendents were asked about the existence of an overall parent involvement policy and about the existence of policy in each of these six areas. They were also asked to provide examples of programs related to each policy currently being implemented.

The Sections

Forty-two NCJW Sections participated in the survey project. These Sections varied in size and geographic location. NCJW volunteers received training through an in-depth *How-to Guide*, a *Partners in Progress* newsletter, and on-going technical assistance. Sections followed four data collection steps: determining districts in their area; selecting districts to survey; preparing and mailing the survey; and following up.

The Districts Surveyed

Surveys were sent to 436 superintendents. 193 surveys were returned, a response rate of 44.2 percent. The surveyed districts varied widely in number of schools and children; all but a few (96.9%) received federal Chapter 1/ Title 1 funds.

NOTE: ***Because participating districts are not necessarily geographically or demographically representative of school districts nationwide, these results are suggestive of trends rather than conclusive.***

• Highlights •

- Almost 50% of districts surveyed have an overall parent involvement policy.
- There is ample latitude in how policies are put into practice.
- Few opportunities for wide-scale parental decision making exist within many schools.
- Most communications sent home from schools do not provide individualized information for parents about their children.
- Schools are least likely to have policies for training teachers to work with families.
- Many schools develop their own parent involvement programs rather than implementing existing programs.

The Findings

How Many Districts have Parent Involvement Policies?

- Overall Parent Involvement Policy 49.2%
- Parents As Decision Makers 71.6 %
- Communicating with Parents 55.3%
- Reaching Out to Diverse Families 48.7%
- Training Staff to Work with Parents 37.1%
- Communicating About Child's Progress 76.6%
- Providing Links to Social Services 54.3%

What are Districts Doing to Implement Parent Involvement Policies?

Superintendents were asked about the programs and practices implemented to support parent involvement policies. For each type of policy, superintendents mentioned implementing several types of programs, indicating latitude in how such policies are put into practice. The following data highlights programs and practices cited by at least 20% of the districts.

Parents as Decision Makers

- Serving on a school improvement council 70.2%
- Serving on a specific task force 24.8%
- Serving on a district council 23.4%

Less commonly mentioned practices for enabling parents to serve as decision makers included: serving on a Chapter 1 or other advisory council; serving on the PTA; or playing non-advisory roles.

• *Because only a few parents can serve on these councils, decision-making opportunities may be limited to only a small percentage of parents within any one school.*

Communicating with Parents About Helping Their Child Learn

- Written information about the school 48.6%
- Parent-teacher meetings 36.7%
- Parent programs 32.1%

Less frequently mentioned practices included: written reports about the child; school social or orientation events; school interventions; and homework hotlines.

• *Many school-home communications do not provide parents with individualized information about their child.*

Reaching Out to Diverse Families

While no programs and practices to reach out to diverse families were widely cited, approaches for dealing with diversity included: social events; parents as advisors; outreach to specific families; material adaptation; early intervention programs; staff training; support groups; multicultural task forces; and special personnel.

• *There is no standardized approach for addressing the issue of diversity within schools.*

Training Staff to Work with Families

- In-service staff training 52.1%

Less common practices included: in-service workshops by specialists; staff development on curriculum; off-site staff training; and early intervention programs.

• *Among the few schools that have a policy to train teachers to work with families, training is mostly provided in-service rather than by specialized staff.*

Communicating About Child's Progress

- Written reports on child's progress 60.9%
- Meetings about the child's progress 60.3%
- Written communication about school rules/events 49.7%

Less frequently cited activities included: parent orientation events and training programs; PTA advisory committees; and homework assignments and hotlines.

• *It is surprising that practices providing parents with specific information about their child's progress — meetings and written reports — were not more widely cited.*

Providing Links Between Families and Social Services

- Hiring social workers/psychologists 23.4%

Less common linkage strategies included: creating community partnerships; collaborating with social services; providing services; making outside referrals; providing health services, drug awareness, early intervention or teen parenting programs; or working with community agencies.

• *Hiring social workers and implementing intervention and support programs are the most common approaches to linking families with resources.*

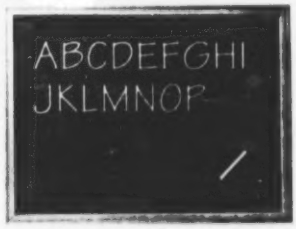
What Else are Districts Doing?

168 additional current district-level parent involvement practices were offered, such as classroom volunteering, open houses, and parent centers. Some superintendents mentioned funding sources (Even Start, Chapter 1, Title 1) rather than specific practices. Only a few superintendents mentioned existing model programs.

Conclusion

The survey data provides a first glimpse into the extent and nature of parent involvement policy at the district level. As policy is an important avenue for developing and sustaining practice, it is encouraging that almost half of the districts have an overall parent involvement policy.

The data also suggests several areas for future study. For example, are the practices reaching a sufficient number of parents and teachers? Are the practices effectively achieving the goals of the policy? To what extent are parents and teachers involved in developing these policies and practices? Such issues warrant future attention as educators and families work together so that children can succeed in school.



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